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In My Opinion

The art of being a Jewish lesbian

by Debby Shapiro

An art? Can the combination of religion and sexuality be an art? Most of you incurable cynics would call this combination impossible. I say that all it takes is some work to make your religion and sexuality work together.

I am Jewish, and have accepted and even revelled in that part of my life for all of my 22 years. My lesbianism, however, lay dormant until a little over a year ago. During that time, I was continually asked how I could remain a Jew and still profess to be a lesbian-feminist. Actually, that was never a problem. I have always believed that Judaism is change. Judaism is interpretation. Many women see Judaism as a patriarchal invention, and they want no part of the religion, or of any organized religion for that matter. What must be realized is that Judaism has changed throughout the years to make it more relevant to the people. It's because of that change that we have the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Lesbian/Gay, et al. factions. We are still Jews, but we have made Judaism, primarily the liturgy, more relevant to our own lives.

The belief has not changed if we say She and Goddess, instead of He and God. It becomes more personal and meaningful to us as women to make these changes. To give you an example of interpretation, look at those moral guardians who say homosexuality is against the Bible. True, the Bible calls homosexuality an abomination, but then it also calls the eating of shellfish and pork an abomination. How many of those moral preachers eat shellfish and pork, and see nothing wrong with that act? Interpretation. By making some minor changes in liturgy, like

the example cited above, I feel that I have my Jewish culture and heritage without sacrificing my feminist principles.

It was this acceptance of both my religion and my sexuality that brought me to Congregation Beth Ahavah, the lesbian/gay synagogue of Philadelphia. I arrived that warm summer night, newly out, and scared out of my wits. Beth Ahavah had just moved into 2116 Walnut St., our present home, and this was the dedication service. Women had come, but had never returned; the sight of only one or two other women had discouraged them.

Well, I stayed, because I had found a family. Here was a synagogue where I could be myself. I could follow my interpretations without fear of censure, which I had received from straight synagogues and religious relatives. This was only the beginning. Less than half a year later, Women's Nite at Beth Ahavah began. It has been a success! More and more women are realizing that Judaism has something to offer. Hopefully, even more women will begin to attend both Women's Nites and our regular services, and understand that some of the things that they were taught, the things that forced them to leave, do not apply any longer or can be changed.

Over the July 4th weekend, Philadelphia will be hosting the 6th International Conference of Lesbian and Gay Jews. It promises to be a fantastic event, with 48 workshops; keynote speaker Seymour Kleinberg, author of *Alienated Affections*; Sabbath services at Rodeph Shalom, the oldest Reform synagogue in the United States; and numerous activities and speakers all promising to make this conference one to remember. Visi-

tors will be converging on Philadelphia from all over the world, and I hope this will be the event that brings many women, especially the Philadelphia women, out to join us.

I am fortunate to be on both the Workshop committee and the Ritual committee. The Workshop committee is organizing workshops of interest to Jewish/lesbian/gay concerns, and includes some separate workshops, like a rap session and a workshop on women's spirituality. The Ritual committee is busy organizing the various services, degenderizing liturgy and compiling a new prayerbook. In addition to the Sabbath services at Rodeph Shalom, there will be three services conducted on Saturday morning. The Traditional service will be taken from a Conservative prayerbook, degenderizing as they go along. A Non-traditional service has been organized by Jeff Grosky. In addition, there will be a Women's service. This is the first time that this kind of service has been done. I consider it to be a Celebration of Women's Energies, and it's fitting that out of all the Conferences—previous conferences have been held in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv, and San Francisco—Philadelphia, the City of Sisterly Love, will be the first to offer this service. It's been an experience organizing the Women's service. It's reinforced my commitment to work at an interpretation of Judaism that I can live with.

I am looking for women to join me. Women who want to experience their culture and heritage again. Women who are willing to work in order to have what they seek to accomplish success. It can be done.

Transsexuals in our community: How dare we exclude?

by Leslie Phillips

Once again, the issue of the status of transsexuals in the gay community has surgaced, and once again, the gay community has put its worst foot forward on the subject.

The issue, as stated at the May 2 "emergency" meeting of Sister-space, was whether a post-operative male-to-female reanssexual would be permitted to be active in the organization. The *real* issue was whether such a person is to be accepted and treated as a woman.

There has long been an uneasy peace between transsexuals *per se* and the "normal" (dare one write "straight") gay community. Expressions such as "transsexuals are the niggers of the gay community" have long been as true as they are ugly, and are so frequently heard as to be recorded many times over in the literature. (And it is certainly neither accident nor coincidence that black gays are so severely discriminated against by

the white gay majority.)

Perhaps the greatest exposure of the gay community to the phenomenon of transsexualism comes in the context of pre-operative male-to-females who temporarily identify as, and with, gay males. Since these individuals who are still anatomically male most often have as part of their gender conflict the need to relate sexually to males, a gay male lifestyle is their logical stepping stone to heterosexuality. The "drag" scene is another.

The next largest aspect of transsexualism that confronts the gay community is in the context of the pre-operative female-to-male whose intermediate identification is of a butch lesbian (and often extremely stereotypically so). Again, these individuals' identification with the gay community is but a stepping stone to heterosexuality (and, in the case of the female-to-males, heterosexuality of the most stereotypical, straightest middle-America ilk), with the add-

ed factor, unlike in most of the male-to-females, that pre-operative relationships—ostensibly lesbian—tend with surprising frequency to survive the butch partners' surgery and stabilize long-term.

In both cases, the former transsexuals, having completed their transitions and fulfilled their now heterosexual dreams, leave the gay community and often vehemently deny ever having been part of it. It is no wonder that a sense of resentment, of having been used, often develops among gays. It is a credit to those segments of the gay community that continue to be as supportive as they have been.

There is a world of difference between the pre-operative transsexual who passes through the gay community as a stepping stone, and the former (post-operative) transsexual who, after completing the sex reassignment process and

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How dare we keep transsexuals out of our community!

(Continued from page 22)

thereby resolving his or her gender conflict, first comes out as a gay person, but gay *with respect to his or her post-operative sexuality*. It is by now well documented that a sizeable group of male-to-female transsexuals will identify post-operatively as lesbians; the estimates vary, but most seem to fall in the range of 15-20 per cent, a figure that is not remarkably different from the percentage of lesbians in the total female population. There have not been, to this writer's knowledge, any cases reported in the medical literature of post-operative female-to-males identifying as gay men, but there are a number of valid reasons for this including both the lesser frequency of female-to-male as opposed to male-to-female transsexualism (various researchers' estimates put the ratio as anywhere from 1:2 to 1:10) and the lesser frequency with which female-to-males opt for genital surgery, given the as yet relative imperfection of the female-to-male surgery. This writer is, however, personally aware of the number of prospective post-operative gay men, and no doubt others will arise as the medical techniques improve.

Is the post-operative male-to-female transsexual a woman? If her sexual and affectional attraction is to other women, is she a lesbian? (Perhaps even more significant is the question, is her partner still a lesbian?) These are the questions with which the gay community, and especially the lesbian-feminist community, has been struggling.

The usual separatist response to these questions—a response which was all too evident at the May 2 Sisterspace meeting—is that former transsexuals cannot be women because they once socialized with men and because they lack clitorises. The trouble with this approach is simply that it is factually in error. Former transsexuals can and do have clitorises; the fact that many don't merely serves to underscore the arrogance of the male-dominated medical profession, especially male surgeons who operate on women's bodies. In this regard, many former transsexuals share the plight of other women who have been disfigured by over-zealous physicians. (This writer remembers storming out of more than one male surgeon's office after being told what "the vast majority of genetic females don't care about their clitorises, anyway" as his excuse for ignoring that part of the anatomy!)

One nationally prominent feminist's explanation of transsexualism, and her reason for excluding former transsexuals from the lesbian-feminist movement, regardless of their sexuality, is that she believes transsexualism to be an ailment of society and not of the individual. She—as well as the women of Sisterspace who even bother to state a rationale for their prejudice and exclusionism—maintain that transsexualism is a product of a society in which the sexes are not equal. Victoria Brownworth in her opinion piece in the May 29-June 11 issue of the *Gay News* states a belief that transsexualism would not even exist in a society in which the sexes were equal. Such claims run counter to the entire body of scientific evidence on the causes of transsexualism.

There is no dispute that the gender identity conflict, the contradiction between sense of being and apparent anatomy, exists at an extremely early age—within the first two, or at the most, three years of life. Interviews with countless transsexual persons confirm this. The knowledge of being a "female trapped in a male body," or vice versa usually goes back to the individual's earliest recollection. It is difficult to imagine how such a person could be successfully socialized in either gender (and, according to some of the psychiatric theories, these individuals are being brought up in family units in which "normal" socialization is not even taking place); it is even more difficult to imagine how such a person, whose earliest memories are of gender conflict and whose deepest desire is a resolution of that conflict, would grow up exercising or even appreciating "male privilege." Transsexuals, former and pre-operative, have probably the highest unemployment and underemployment of any minority in our

Can lesbians really believe that transsexuals would voluntarily accept the triple oppression of womanhood, revealing oneself as a transsexual and coming out as a lesbian just to manipulate the women's community?

society. Is coming to grips with one's transsexuality and opting for the best—the only successful—adjustment procedure that is available an exercise of "male privilege"? Is accepting being economically underprivileged for the remainder of one's life an exercise of "male privilege"?

It is the height of oversimplification to say that transsexualism exists because we live in a society in which the sexes are not equal. Admittedly, we do live in such a society. The dominant Western European culture, of which our own is an offshot, has been, since about the time of the Protestant Reformation, the most gender dimorphic culture this planet has ever seen. The phenomenon of transsexualism, however, has been recorded in the histories of virtually every civilization, and observed in pre-literate cultures (including some explicitly matriarchal cultures as well as those in which there is a good measure of sexual equality). Again, the overwhelming weight of the evidence is that transsexualism is an individual condition, not a societal one.

It is regrettable that transsexualism is often viewed as a sexual problem—a sexual preference, as it were—rather than the gender problem that it is. The word "transsexual" itself was an unfortunate

choice, rhyming as it does with heterosexual and homosexual, and leading many uninformed persons to simply assume that it is a third sexual preference. Such a view was even voiced at Sisterspace, by individuals who ought to know better, stating that transsexuals ought to relate "to their own kind," as if transsexuals were a class paralleling homosexual women and homosexual men.

At the start of this discussion, the questions of whether a former transsexual could be a woman or a lesbian were raised. Sisterspace—and Ms. Brownworth—would seemingly answer a resounding "no" to both, despite logic, despite science and law, despite reality. The narrowmindedness and illogic of this conclusion is perhaps even best seen from the conclusions to which it would lead. If a former male-to-female transsexual is still a man, then what of the former female-to-male transsexual? The same "logic" would compel the result that this individual is still a woman. Can you really allow this result, that an individual who has gone through tremendous pain and expense to eradicate every vestige of femaleness, who has grown a beard and acquired a penis, whose preferred mode of sexual expression is penile intercourse—can you, my sisters, really still consider this person to be a woman? Can you consider the sexual partner of this person to be a lesbian? This is where the arbitrary exclusion of a former male-to-female transsexual, who is a woman and whose sexual partners are most assuredly lesbians, must certainly lead you.

What is your fear, my sisters? What is your alarm? Can you really believe that there are ranks upon ranks of men who would undergo reassignment surgery just to power-trip the women's movement? Do you think the medical establishment would let them? Can you really believe they would voluntarily accept the triple oppression of assuming womanhood, revealing oneself as a transsexual, and coming out as a lesbian just to manipulate the women's community?

It is no secret that former transsexuals whose pasts have not been disclosed, whose physical appearance is such that there are no tell-tale reminders of their past, are accepted without question in the lesbian community. Is being closeted, is being able to "pass," going to be the standard of acceptance? Shall the welfare recipient dropout whose past has not been disclosed because she has no past worth disclosing be the only former transsexual to gain acceptance in your ranks? Where shall the rest of us turn? We seek to share your womanspace because that space is necessary and precious to us too.

The Pennsylvania Council on Sexual Minorities recently took a much-needed first step by stating that former transsexuals should be affirmed, accepted and treated in all respects as members of the gender in which they are now living, especially by members of the gay community. Lesbian and gay organizations statewide will shortly be called upon to affirm these principles as their own. It is time to show all of our sisters and brothers that we truly are a liberation movement, or else we might as well all go back into our closets.